American Research Journal of Humanities & Social Science (ARJHSS)
E-ISSN: 2378-702X
Volume-09, Issue-11, pp-24-28
www.arjhss.com

Research Paper **Open Access**

A Double-Edged Domesticity: Motherhood, Empire, and Women's Authority in Westward Expansion

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ABSTRACT: Nineteenth-century domestic ideology is usually remembered as confining women to the home. This paper asks how that same ideology shaped women's authority during westward expansion, and why it produced such different outcomes for settler and Native American women. Comparing Anglo-American settler women in Texas and on the overland trails with Cherokee and Caddo women, chiefly between the 1810s and the 1850s, and drawing on petitions, diaries, and reform writing, it argues that domestic ideology expanded settler women's public influence while undermining authority Native American women had long held. Settler women invoked Republican Motherhood and "separate spheres" to justify benevolent societies, community-building, and support for Manifest Destiny, gaining a public voice still subordinate to male authority. For Cherokee and Caddo women, Euro-American domesticity devalued agricultural and diplomatic authority rooted in matrilineal and agrarian societies, while the Cherokee Nation's adoption of Anglo-American political structures further restricted women's role in formal governance even before removal. Yet the language of motherhood was never the settlers' alone: Cherokee women invoked it not to enter public life but to defend authority they already held. Domesticity thus functioned as a double-edged instrument of expansion, revealing how gender ideology helped build the racial hierarchies of nineteenth-century empire.

Keywords - Cherokee women, domesticity, Manifest Destiny, Native American women, westward expansion

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1817, Cherokee women, speaking as "your mothers, your sisters," begged their national council not to part with "any more of our land" [1]. Twelve years later, Catharine Beecher urged American women to "stretch out the supplicating hand" on the Cherokees' behalf, while insisting that women's proper power was only "to sway the empire of affection" [2]. Both appeals spoke as women about Cherokee land, yet they rested on very different kinds of authority: the Cherokee women spoke as holders of the land in question, Beecher as an outsider whose influence was meant to stop at the threshold of politics. That contrast points to a larger story. Domesticity is usually remembered as a private ideal, a nineteenth-century prescription that kept women confined to the home. Yet as the United States expanded westward, through the Oregon Trail migrations, the Texas Revolution, and the Indian Removal Act, that same ideal did very public work, and it did not do the same work for every woman. This paper asks how domestic ideology shaped women's authority during westward expansion, and why it produced such different outcomes for settler and Native American women.

Historians have largely answered these questions separately. Barbara Welter has shown that the ideology of "True Womanhood" bound nineteenth-century women to the home through the interlocking virtues of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity [3], while Adrienne Caughfield has shown that settler women nonetheless drew on that same domestic ideology to justify an expanding public presence, from benevolent societies to political advocacy for Manifest Destiny [4]. Historians of Cherokee removal tell a different story under the same ideology: Theda Perdue has traced how Cherokee women's political authority eroded even before removal [5], and Jane Simonsen has shown how reformers recast Native women's traditional labor as "savage" against an idealized white domesticity [6]. Read separately, these histories can look like two unrelated stories, one of expanding opportunity and one of loss. Amy Kaplan's concept of "manifest domesticity," which ties domestic ideology to the project of empire, offers a way to read them together [7].

Comparing Anglo-American settler women in Texas and on the overland trails with Cherokee and Caddo women, chiefly between the 1810s and the 1850s, this paper argues that domesticity functioned as a

double-edged tool of American expansion, extending settler women's civic influence within enduring patriarchal limits while eroding the authority Native American women held in their own societies, and in doing so reinforcing the racial hierarchies of nineteenth-century imperialism. Yet the comparison also shows that the language of motherhood was never the settlers' alone: Cherokee women invoked it not to enter public life but to defend authority their matrilineal society had long granted them. The sections that follow trace settler women's prescribed roles and their expansion on the frontier, then turn to Native American women's authority before expansion, its disruption, and their resistance, before comparing the two experiences.

II. SETTLER WOMEN'S PRESCRIBED ROLES BEFORE EXPANSION

Before westward expansion, settler women's lives were governed by the ideology of "separate spheres," which confined them to domestic roles while men dominated public arenas like business and politics. Welter identifies four cardinal virtues, piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, that together defined this ideal of "True Womanhood" and by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, neighbors, and society [3]. This framework, rooted in the early American republic, positioned women as the moral anchors of the home, responsible for nurturing their families and maintaining household stability [4]. The concept of Republican Motherhood defined women's role as raising virtuous citizens to support the new nation [4]. As Caughfield notes, poems like "The Mother of the West" celebrated women's domestic influence, portraying them as essential to moral and social order [4]. These pre-existing gender norms shaped how settler women navigated the frontier, providing a foundation for their evolving roles as they moved to the West, where their domestic position would take on a new significance in the context of national expansion.

III. EXPANDING SETTLER WOMEN'S PUBLIC INFLUENCE

Westward expansion did not free settler women from domestic ideology; it gave that ideology new public territory to claim. Drawing on Republican Motherhood and the cult of true womanhood, women in frontier regions like Texas, during the Texas Revolution, engaged in activism that aligned with their domestic identities. They participated in benevolent societies and public ceremonies that bolstered national identity and promoted "civilization" in the new territories [4]. Women also played active roles in supporting Manifest Destiny, contributing money, clothes, ammunition, and even political advocacy to expansionist efforts. For instance, some women promoted "filibustering endeavors" in the 1850s, activity that tested the limits of acceptable female behavior [4]. During conflicts like the Mexican War, their involvement grew more pronounced as they sewed uniforms, cooked for armies, and even fought, showing a shift in gender expectations while still framing their contributions as extensions of nurturing roles [4].

IV. THE DEMANDS AND REWARDS OF FRONTIER DOMESTIC LIFE

On the frontier, settler women's domestic sphere did not shrink; it expanded. Women managed households and farms in rugged environments, often taking on physically taxing jobs like farming or defending homesteads in the absence of men [8]. Historian John Mack Faragher's study of overland migrants similarly found that women's domestic responsibilities multiplied rather than diminished on the trail west, even as prevailing gender ideology continued to reserve most major decisions for men [9]. The relentlessness of that labor comes through in migrants' own writing: Amelia Stewart Knight, traveling to Oregon in 1853, recorded days consumed entirely by camp chores, noting on one evening only that she had "been busy cooking, roasting coffee, etc., today, and have come into the wagon to write this and make our bed" [10]. Yet the same labor that consumed women's days also gave them a stake in the communities forming around them. Their domestic work extended to community-building efforts, such as organizing schools or churches, which were seen as essential to establishing "civilized" societies [4]. As Caughfield observed, women's involvement in voluntary associations and public events gave them a voice in shaping their communities, enhancing their societal roles without directly challenging gender norms [4]. Beecher's 1829 appeal shows how carefully that voice was framed: even while urging women to act on the Cherokees' behalf, she located their proper influence in the power "to administer the sweet charities of life," not in formal political power [2]. Frontier domesticity thus cut both ways for settler women: it multiplied their burdens, but it also gave them a recognized public role, one valued precisely because it served the larger project of settling and "civilizing" the West.

V. NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POWER BEFORE EXPANSION

In contrast to settler women, Native American women from Cherokee and Caddo societies held significant economic and social power within their communities before westward expansion. The Cherokee operated on a matrilineal system in which women owned land, managed agriculture, and produced goods like corn, beans, and cotton cloth for trade central to the tribe's economy; women also took part directly in political life, sitting in

councils, and a woman known as the "War Woman" could even determine the fate of captives [5]. Their authority extended to property itself; as one eighteenth-century observer noted of Cherokee custom, "Marriage gives no right to the husband over the property of his wife" (quoted in [5]). Their roles complemented men's responsibilities in hunting and diplomacy, reflecting a cultural balance rather than a hierarchy like that of settler society [11]. Similarly, Caddo women cultivated crops, produced deerskins, and played diplomatic roles by hosting visitors, reinforcing their community's stability and peaceful relations [11]. This diplomatic authority had deep roots: in earlier encounters with Spanish missionaries, Caddo women held religious and political influence significant enough to shape the terms of alliance, even though Spanish colonizers often failed to grasp the true scope of that authority [12]. As Mary Scheer notes, these roles show Native women's authority by tying their daily lives to both economic production and cultural preservation, which made them vital to their societies' survival [11].

VI. DISRUPTION AND DISPLACEMENT OF NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN'S ROLES

For Native American women, the erosion of authority began before physical displacement, and displacement then compounded it. As Cherokee leaders adopted Anglo-American political structures in the 1820s, the Cherokee Nation's 1827 constitution explicitly restricted voting rights and council seats to "free male citizens," formally excluding women from the governance they had long shared [5]. The Cherokee then faced displacement along the Trail of Tears, forcing women to abandon fields, rebuild households, and find new food sources in unfamiliar territories [11]. Conditions during removal itself were especially brutal for women: Cherokee women faced sexual assault, forced labor, separation from their families, and dangerous childbirth in the stockades and along the trail [5]. Caddo women similarly struggled after repeated relocations, as militia attacks and land theft left them vulnerable and unable to fulfill their agricultural duties [11]. Anglo settlers' hostility and policies like Texas president Mirabeau Lamar's campaign to remove Native tribes further eroded women's economic power by targeting their crops and livestock [11]. Additionally, white reformers imposed Euro-American ideals of domesticity, pressuring Native women to adopt "civilized" household practices that conflicted with their traditional roles; as Jane Simonsen argues, this framed Native labor as "savage" in contrast to idealized white domesticity [6]. Violence and land loss stripped away the material basis of Native women's authority; imposed domesticity supplied the justification, recasting that loss as the progress of civilization.

VII. NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN'S RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

Native American women did not absorb these losses passively; they resisted political marginalization directly and worked to preserve their traditional roles. As early as May 1817, Cherokee women addressed the council directly to oppose further land cessions: "Your mothers, your sisters, ask and beg of you not to part with any more of our land" [1]. The following year, in a June 1818 petition, Cherokee women warned that removal threatened their very identity, writing that being "compelled to remove the other side of the Mississippi is dreadful to us because it appears to us that we, by this removal, shall be brought to a savage state again," and resolving "to hold our country in common as hitherto" [13]. This activism, invoking motherly authority to urge male tribal leaders to protect their lands, came well before removal became federal policy [5]. Cherokee women rebuilt fields and households after displacement, maintaining their agricultural responsibilities where possible [11]. Caddo women similarly re-established village life after relocations, continuing to cultivate crops and sustain their communities [11]. While the Texas Revolution and other warfare increased their vulnerability to violence and disrupted their traditional systems, Native women nevertheless preserved important elements of their traditional gender roles, reflecting their determination to sustain cultural practices amid profound political and economic disruption [11].

VIII. DIVERGENT OUTCOMES OF DOMESTICITY

Set side by side, these two histories show a single ideology producing opposite results. Settler women gained opportunities to expand their influence, using domesticity as a tool to participate in public life and support national goals like Manifest Destiny; their labor was celebrated as a marker of civilization, aligning with white society's values [6]. Native American women, by contrast, faced significant losses as displacement and violence stripped them of the land and resources critical to their roles, while assimilation efforts devalued their traditional labor as an obstacle to progress. The same ideology of domestic virtue, in other words, was mobilized to include one group and dispossess the other.

This divergence was not, however, a matter of settler women escaping constraint altogether. Literary historian Amy Kaplan argues that nineteenth-century domestic ideology was never separate from American empire-building: the rhetoric of "domestication," taming "savagery" at home, in national policy, and abroad, linked women's household labor directly to the imperial project [7]. Even Beecher, who urged American women to petition on behalf of the Cherokee, was careful to frame that activism as charity rather than politics, insisting that women "have nothing to do with any struggle for power nor any right to dictate the decisions of those that

rule over them" [2]. Settler women's expanded public role, then, was licensed only so long as it operated through, not against, male political authority, echoing the same boundary Cherokee women faced once the 1827 constitution formally barred them from that authority altogether. White reformers, meanwhile, saw themselves as suited to "civilize" Native women through domestic training, reinforcing their own power; for Native women, these ideals clashed directly with existing roles in agriculture and diplomacy. Cherokee women's own petitions invoked motherhood to resist land sales, but their claim rested on an older authority: in a matrilineal society where women held land and sat in council, speaking as mothers meant speaking as political actors, not as keepers of a private sphere. The same language of motherhood that settler women used to enter public life, Cherokee women used to defend a public role they already held, even as imposed domesticity elsewhere aimed to erase their cultural identities. Both cases reveal how gender roles were made to serve colonial objectives, whether by inclusion or by dispossession.

This narrative of disruption, however, is not without complication. Perdue contends that removal itself "changed little in terms of the status of Cherokee women," since Cherokee women's formal political power had already been curtailed a decade earlier by the 1827 constitution's restriction of citizenship rights to men [5]. Read this way, the deepest blow to Native women's authority came not only from the violence of displacement but from an earlier, internal shift toward Anglo-American political structures, one that both settler pressure and Cherokee leaders' own choices helped produce. This complicates any simple settler-versus-Native framework and suggests that gender hierarchy spread through westward expansion along multiple, overlapping paths.

IX. CONCLUSION

This paper began with two appeals about Cherokee land, one from Cherokee women in 1817 and one from Catharine Beecher in 1829. Placed beside the wider histories of settler and Native American women during westward expansion, they show that domesticity was never only a private ideal. For settler women, it was a passport into public life: Beecher and the Texas women Caughfield describes turned the language of moral motherhood into benevolent societies, schools, churches, and open support for Manifest Destiny [2], [4]. That passport, however, came with borders. Beecher herself insisted that women "have nothing to do with any struggle for power" [2], and settler women's influence lasted only as long as it ran through, rather than against, male political authority.

For Cherokee and Caddo women, the same ideal pointed the other way. Reformers recast their agricultural labor as "savage" [6], measured them against a household model their societies had never shared, and pressed that model on them alongside the land seizure and violence of removal. Perdue's account of the 1827 constitution shows that the loss did not wait for the Trail of Tears: Cherokee women were shut out of governance a decade earlier, through their nation's own adoption of Anglo-American political forms [5]. Native women's authority was thus withdrawn through several channels at once, namely political exclusion, land seizure, and cultural assimilation, with domesticity supplying the moral language that made the whole process look like civilization.

Why did one ideal produce such different outcomes? The answer lies less in the ideal itself than in where each group of women stood when it reached them. Settler women began outside formal public power, so domesticity could serve as a way in, however bounded. Cherokee and Caddo women already held recognized authority over agriculture, diplomacy, and, among the Cherokee, land itself, so an imposed domesticity could only subtract from it. That difference also explains the contrast with which this paper began. When Beecher spoke for the Cherokee, she asked for an influence she did not formally possess; when Cherokee women spoke as mothers and sisters, they defended an authority their matrilineal society had long recognized. The language of motherhood was never the settlers' alone, but it meant something different on each side of the frontier.

This study is limited in scope. Its settler evidence comes mainly from Texas and the overland trails, and its Native evidence from Cherokee and Caddo communities, groups that seldom encountered one another directly. Extending the comparison to other Native nations, and to the later reform era that Simonsen examines, would test how far the pattern holds. Even within these limits, the comparison suggests that the question of who counted as a proper woman was inseparable from the question of who would keep the land.

X. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Mr. Brooks for his guidance in shaping my thesis and argument structure, and Ms. Kane for her assistance with research and citation methods.

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